



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania Political briefing:

**In preparation for elections the Lithuanian political parties declare
the aim to become the people's parties**

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September has put in full swing the preparations of the political actors in Lithuania for the upcoming electoral season next year. The Parliament fixed the date for the Elections of the President of the Republic on 12 May, 2019 to be followed by the Elections to the European Parliament on 26 May. These two nation-wide elections which will define the political direction of the country (especially as concerning the foreign affairs) for the period until 2024 will be preceded by the third elections to take place in 2019 - the elections to the Local Governments Councils due on 3 March.

For the observers of the European political scene, which has been reshaped by the major political shift from the center left towards the political Right and the Right-wing populism during the recent years, the Lithuanian political developments that are unfolding in the preparations for the next year's elections might come as a complete surprise - an outlier from the processes taking place elsewhere in the European Union.

The main Lithuanian political parties representing the center-right (Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, further to be referred as the Conservatives) and the center-left politics (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, further to be referred as the Social Democrats), which have for decades defined the political polarization of the society by adhering strongly to the sets of the political values associated with the political Right and Left, have declared to become the people's parties with an unmistakable ethos of the Left. The leader of the Conservatives has declared his party's aim to become the people's party and, in relation to this, some of the party leaders even expressed their vocal support for the party's turn to the Left. On the other side of the political spectrum, the leader of the Social Democrats, prepared the new party manifesto (influenced by the agenda of the European progressive Left and informed by the

agenda of the Labour party under Jeremy Corbin) and declared his party's support for the Left alternative to the neoliberal capitalism.

Below is a brief analysis of the ongoing realignments of the main political actors on the domestic scene, trying to make sense of the existing turn towards the phenomenon which could be regarded as a model of people's participatory democracy. This model to be touched upon further differs from the main models which have influenced the Baltic countries during the transition period (the Anglo-Saxon capitalism, the Nordic welfare model and the German social market model) in at least one respect: it creates a broader base for political legitimacy by opening up the space for non-party politics linked to the party organizations as intermediaries.

Three developments can be identified within the political parties which have been shaping a new political course during the current pre-election period in Lithuania. Firstly, the new leadership in the main political parties (which coincided with a generational change a few years ago) together with a new generation of leaders brought in a less partisan, a more managerial and indeed a more consensual style of leadership. Gabrielius Landsbergis, the chairman of the Conservatives, Gintautas Paluckas, the chairman of the Social Democrats, Remigijus Šimašius, the leader of the liberals in Vilnius, Remigijus Žemaitaitis, the chairman of the Law and Order Party – all of them arrived to the leadership positions as the figures of consensus (though without internal tensions which in the case of the Social Democrats resulted in the minority split of the party). To sustain the consensus the need to broaden the appeal resulted in a more engaging and less partisan party management adopted by these young and ambitious leaders who are in their late 30s.

Secondly, a very small member base of the party organizations numbering between ca. 14000 and 18000 registered party members nation-wide (in a nation of 2,8 million inhabitants) in the major parties (the lowest level of the party participation in the EU) make the parties more reliable on the state institutions, to which the new generation of the party leaders (having a short or no track

record of public service) wants to keep a distance; hence, their efforts to work also with non-party members to achieve the political goals of gaining and/or sustaining power. Thirdly, the emergence of a new political party which combined the elements of the center-left and the center-right politics (Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union) which defeated the Conservatives and the Social Democrats as well as the populist movements on both sides of the political spectrum at the previous parliamentary elections in 2016 created a new political reality and a new electorate which the main political parties are keen to retake from the incumbents of power at the next year's elections.

The talk about becoming the people's parties has already been turned into actions. The Conservatives have announced the primaries for the selection of their candidate for the President's elections allowing, in an unprecedented way, the non-party members to participate in the party primaries. The registration of the non-party voters in these primaries could be done online by registering with an email or a Facebook or a Google social media account. The only requirement (apart from filling out the ID details on the registration form) is to tick of the box indicating one's agreement with the Values of the Conservatives as described in a lengthy paragraph in a separate document that could be accessed online. The website for registering for the primaries of the Conservative party has been entitled „The victory of Democracy“ (Demokratijos pergalė, in Lithuanian) and was meant to emphasize a new approach adopted by the party towards non-party members.

This approach de facto creates a new understanding of the political democracy as based on the consensus between the members of a particular party organization (in this case, the Conservatives) and the society-at-large. In such model a party organization acts not only as an entity pursuing its own goals of capturing and retaining power but also as an organization which negotiates terms with society. Such a model is different from the prevailing democratic models which are based on a strong party membership and the competition of the parties in the political market of ideas. One could term this model a people's

participatory democracy as it emphasizes the participatory aspect and the consensual part in negotiating the terms for power. Thus, the leader of the Conservatives has argued about the need to go beyond the traditional division between the Left and the Right and to reflect and to act upon a new division which, according to his views, exists between the political parties of the Power („Valdžios partijos“ in Lithuanian) and the political parties of the People („žmonių partijos“ in Lithuanian). At least in theory he de-emphasized the political bias when referring to the political parties of the people as a new model for the party organization, though admitted that his indeed is the agenda of the New Right, a center-right political representation with an integrated agenda inspired from the social agenda of the Left (hence, the turn to the Left, as supported publicly by some of the Conservatives).

The turn towards the conceived notion of the people's participatory democracy, a democracy which derives its source of power through the legitimization of the political processes with a mandate of a wide electorate (the people) can be observed also in further developments occasioned by the approaching electoral year. Thus, contrary to the Conservatives, the Social Democrats are engaging with the notion of the people's democracy by broadening the participatory processes within the party internally. Thus, unprecedentedly, the social democrats are proposing for the post of the Mayor of Vilnius not one but three high-profile candidates, thus leaving it to “the people” to decide who is the most suitable to take up this position. Within the Liberal movement one of the key Liberals and the current incumbent of the office of the Mayor of Vilnius has taken a position not to raise his candidate on the party list (which is tarnished by the allegations of corruption) but to campaign together with “the people”, on the ballot list of an electoral committee outside of the party. Electoral committees of voters have been allowed to participate in the local elections since 2015 when the respective changes were made to the Law on Elections to Municipal Councils resulting in a number of the non-party members

becoming the mayors in the regional cities and/or forming the non-partisan coalitions.

The drive towards the grass-roots engagement in the party politics is effecting also the populist movements on the center-left (the Labour Party) and the center-right (the Party of the Law and Order) which have campaigned in the name of the people since the start of their existence. The former leader of the Party of the Law and Order, Rolandas Paksas, a former president in 2003-2004 (who was impeached by the Parliament and disallowed from participating in the elections until the decision of the European Court of Human Rights reinstated his rights to participate in free elections in 2014 which led him to be elected as a Member of European Parliament) has distanced itself from the former party and declared his intention to campaign for the Presidency next year together with the new movement put for that purpose and named after the popular song “I Call You the Nation” (“Šaukiu aš tautą“ in Lithuanian).

To sum up, the model of a people’s participatory democracy is becoming an accepted way of thinking in the political culture of Lithuania and which also echoes verbatim article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania which states that “the institutions of power serve the people” (“Valdžios įstaigos tarnauja žmonėms“, in Lithuanian). The leadership change and the limited membership base of the political parties create a momentum for opening the party organizations to embrace a wider society and adopt the role of consensus builders in society. Though the upcoming electoral season might not create a political upheaval and might not result in creating a new form of democracy, yet the voice of the people which is being listened to might create some of the unlikely outcomes, of which a wider and a more participatory society can emerge.